



At the Head of the Smart Growth Pack: Earl Blumenauer

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Offbeat lawmaker presses Congress to get in step on quality of life

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Even after six years of participating in a Capitol Hill process that regularly grinds great ideas to partisan mush, Oregon Congressman Earl Blumenauer still has a streak of the idealist. He commutes to work on a bicycle, lives in a spartan Capitol Hill apartment, is superbly fit, and appears at committee hearings wearing polka dot bow ties.

When he arrived in SUV-guzzling, buy-your-way to influence, boom time Washington in 1996 as an unabashed progressive from one of America's most livable cities, Mr.

Blumenauer's right wing opponents genuinely derided him as a wacky lightweight. His unconventional views about development — such as trying to convince the road-building lobby and its friends in Congress that killing urban freeways produces much greater economic and cultural benefits than building them — even drew a snort or two from friends

But the 53-year-old lawyer and lawmaker, who was born, raised, and educated in Portland, had irrefutable evidence that the seemingly illogical actually made sense. As a young Democratic state representative in the 1970s he helped replace Portland's proposed Mt. Hood Freeway with a new light rail line. It was a crucial early step in Portland's transformation from a tired Pacific Northwest river town to a glittering 21st century city with a quality of life so superior that people and businesses are flocking there.

Similarly, in post 9/11 Washington, Congressional colleagues are now viewing Mr. Blumenauer's thrifty, energy-efficient, and healthy lifestyle — and his ideas about conserving the countryside and rebuilding America's cities — with a great deal more respect. He's emerged as Capitol Hill's foremost authority on curbing sprawl and making cities more livable and is widely recognized as one of the national Smart Growth movement's most articulate and tireless leaders.



An accomplished runner and road biker, Rep. Earl Blumenauer is constantly in motion, traveling to dozens of cities every year to meet with Smart Growth leaders, speak to residents, and convince local leaders that the movement's vision and goals are coming into sharp focus almost everywhere, including in Washington, D.C.

He's achieved such acclaim by being patient and strategic, which is one of the luxuries of being elected from Oregon's third congressional district with nearly 70 percent majorities. Year by year, piece by piece, Mr. Blumenauer is returning the favor by serving up millions of dollars for useful projects in his district — \$64 million for light rail in Portland this year, for instance — and simultaneously building the national Smart Growth movement's political foundation in Congress.

As the founder and co-chairman of the congressional Livable Communities Task Force, which now boasts 50 members, Mr. Blumenauer promotes new federal policies to alter the tax code, conserve farmland and open space, establish more affordable housing, invest in cities, and provide federal support for better state and local planning.

One of the task force's many achievements is convincing the House this year to invest \$1 billion in farmland conservation over the next decade as part of the 2002 farm policy bill, up from \$35 million in the 1996 Farm Bill. Another is Mr. Blumenauer's Community Character Act, which would provide federal incentives and financial support to help cities and states plan better.

With nearly 60 cosponsors, the bill has gained enough momentum to attract critical attention from the White House and from Mel Martinez, the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, who in May attacked the measure as "infringing on local control." Mr. Blumenauer, unfazed, immediately responded, describing the bill's benefits as voluntary, and accusing the President and other opponents as being out of step with the times and with voters.

"Being able to preserve quality of life and make a community more livable is really at the core of what's driven so many social, economic, and technological revolutions throughout American history," said Mr. Blumenauer in a recent interview. "At its core, Smart Growth is a way to make our families safer, healthier, and more economically secure in a world that is at once larger than it's ever been, connected to every corner of the world, but also smaller because we're affected in ways we've never seen before. At its core Smart Growth expresses what most people want in connecting to their communities and their fellow citizens."

Mr. Blumenauer started the Committee for a Livable Future, a political action committee to finance congressional campaigns of like-minded colleagues. It has helped to elect new Smart Growth lawmakers. "LivPac is the only organization focused on electing proponents of Smart Growth policies and was there when I needed help the most," said Representative Rush Holt, a New Jersey Democrat.

Mr. Blumenauer also is a member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, where he's been influential in convincing Congress to open transportation planning to much more public influence and oversight. He's helped convince his colleagues to invest billions of dollars more in public transit, causing what has come to be popularly called a "railvolution" across the country. More than a dozen cities are

either planning for or have begun construction on new light rail systems. A dozen more are enlarging existing systems.

"We're finding out that benign neglect and some of the development policies of the past that are aggressively negative simply don't work," he said. "There is not a single community that has paved its way out of traffic congestion. We're finding, for instance, that areas that have moved to providing more transportation choices, particularly as it relates to rail and street car, are doing very well. People love it."

He added: "Salt Lake City. The Olympics would not have worked without the construction of light rail in Salt Lake."

Outside Washington, Mr. Blumenauer sees growing public support for halting sprawl and a flourishing Smart Growth movement. He noted that in 2000 there were 550 state and local ballot measures to conserve farmland, enlarge and modernize public transit systems, rebuild urban neighborhoods, clean up rivers and streams, establish state Smart Growth commissions, and take many other actions to improve the quality of life. Most were approved.

State governments also are enacting new legislation to improve community design, provide support for new conservation-based land use plans, and protect open space. Smart Growth candidates are running for local and state office. In Michigan, for instance, all of the major party candidates, Republican and Democrat, are promising new statutes and government programs to halt sprawl, improve transportation, and protect the Great Lakes.

Mr. Blumenauer has been working to make Smart Growth a national ideal for more than three decades as a state lawmaker, county commissioner, and Portland city commissioner. An accomplished runner and road biker, the divorced father of two is constantly in motion, traveling to dozens of cities every year to meet with Smart Growth leaders, speak to residents, and convince local leaders that the movement's vision and goals are coming into sharp focus almost everywhere.

"In every community that I go to," he said, "I get that day's newspaper and the next day's. Everywhere the newspapers are filled with articles about water quality, air quality, health, affordable housing, transportation, open space. It is a mosaic of issues that relate to livability, which people in Chattanooga, Hartford, Saginaw, and Bakersfield can all relate to and all care deeply about."

Keith Schneider, a regular contributor to the New York Times, Gristmagazine.com, and the Detroit Free Press, is program director of the Michigan Land Use Institute. For more of the Institute's first rate reporting and commentary on Smart Growth see www.mlui.org. Reach Mr. Schneider at keith@mlui.org.



